

The Commons

Yours Truly:

The Practice of Writing Letters



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Series Design: Amanda Barnes, SASD Design Service
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Eric D. Lehman

The School of Arts and Sciences, University of Bridgeport

During my first year of college I wrote my first letter, and that same year I first opened an email account. Of course I had written what might be called letters before, but they were short child-messages, a few sentences on half-size sheets of lined paper. Almost like emails, in fact. But I had a girlfriend left behind in high school, and friends I was not ready to leave. So I wrote them long, full pieces of correspondence: diatribes about the miseries of dorm life and elegies to the supposedly epic past we had shared together. Occasionally they even wrote back. After all, this was 1990 and not many people had email yet. Facebook wouldn't arrive until the next century.

The first real letters I received were from Ford Hofferberth. He was originally in my brother's crowd of friends, and over breaks we began to talk, and then write. These letters always ran several pages long, and were immediately sincere and serious. As other friends dropped away through disuse, the letters we exchanged kept Ford and me close. When he took a year abroad in Nepal, his letters became even longer, and even more frank.

Nepal is great. It is like summer camp. I am in a new wild place without the luxuries of home. I must survive by my wits. It is only as good as I want it to be. I cannot drink the water without

chemicals and filters. The water is cold. The food is rugged, but tastes the best. Nothing beats the sunset or sunrise. The scenery is inspiring. Keeps you going. The only difference is that I cannot just go home when these qualities get too much. That is the good thing about letters. It is a chance for me to escape this camp and think back to an easier time... Eric, I have never been understood by anybody. It feels good to write anything down to someone and have them understand it or just enjoy the thought. My brother cannot grasp me. Not my parents – they just ‘love’ me.¹

Ford had found a willing and like-minded reader, and I found the same in him. What’s more, I enjoyed taking an hour or two out of a day to write back. It became something to look forward to.

During the first few years I thought that the act of writing with a pencil or pen was the important part, but soon found that typing letters on the computer and printing them out worked just as well. No, it wasn’t the method that made the difference, it was the intention, the thoughtful taking of time, and perhaps something else, something more. I also realized the style of the correspondence was not the same as the form. When my wife sends me a postcard on which she has written a short poem, this is not a letter. At first it seems to take the form, if not the style, but it remains a poem sent by mail. It is not a *letter*. A letter form can be written in an email, though perhaps not in a hundred character text message. Any message between two people is *correspondence*, but a letter is a certain *form* of that correspondence.

So, what is that form? It is not immediately easy to define. When I first read the letters of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I realized that the best letters were a type of literature, far better in their case than any biography or novel based on their lives. What gave the Brownings’ letters the possibility of transcending basic messages to each other? It was not just that they were great poets, because many great authors of other forms have written fairly awful letters, and many non-authors have written some of the best. Lord Chesterfield’s letters to his son are far better and

more interesting than the most comprehensive political manual. Napoleon's letters to Josephine sprinkle more spice than the trashiest romance novel. And Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Galatians give clear instruction and inspiration to those looking to live a Christian life. What is it that makes these personal communications universally loved, taking them beyond telegrams or text messages? What makes them *letters*?

One of the most famous American letters is Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife before the battle of Bull Run. Born in 1829, Ballou attended Brown University, served as a lawyer and representative in Rhode Island, and married Sarah Hart Shumway in 1855. As a major in the army and a staunch Lincoln supporter, he hurried to the front at the outbreak of the Civil War. At the first battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861 a cannon ball sheared off Ballou's leg, and he died a few days later. Confederate soldiers dug up his grave, beheading and burning the body, an atrocity that Governor William Sprague of Rhode Island railed against in the halls of Congress, and which turned many doubters against the Rebellion. A letter he wrote to his wife on July 14 was found in his trunk, and was hand-delivered to Sarah Ballou by Sprague himself.

So, what makes this letter so notable in part is context. But it is not only context – after all Ballou is hardly the first or last man to write a wartime deathbed letter. No, there is more. Ballou is staggeringly honest, telling his wife that he is probably going to die: “Lest I should not be able to write you again, I feel impelled to write lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more....Our movement may be one of a few days duration and full of pleasure – and it may be one of severe conflict and death to me.” But Ballou also knows his audience, knows what his wife needs to hear, saying:

I cannot describe to you my feelings on this calm summer night, when two thousand men are sleeping around me, many of them enjoying the last, perhaps, before that of death – and I, suspicious that Death is creeping behind me with his fatal dart, am communing with God, my country, and thee.

I have sought most closely and diligently, and often in my breast, for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of those I loved and I could not find one. A pure love of my country and of the principles have often advocated before the people and “the name of honor that I love more than I fear death” have called upon me, and I have obeyed.

Sarah, my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me to you with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield.

The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when God willing, we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grow up to honorable manhood around us. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me—perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar—that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name.

Ballou succeeds in managing both honesty about his impending death and attention to the needs of his loving reader. It is the tension between these two elements that produces letters which are also great literature.

There’s something about the act of writing a letter that creates honesty. A student who serves in the military tells me that letters he gets from his friends and family are far more forthright than

anything they would ever say to his face. Another who writes to her grandmother reveals her life in a way she never would while texting on her cell phone. Letters often lead to confession, to a flood of emotion and secrets. Painter Dora Carrington's letter to writer Lytton Strachey of May 14, 1921 is a classic confessional, a letter declaring undying love to a man who could never return it. She begins by saying that she wrote another letter that "bared my very soul to you" but that this won't be so honest. She then proceeds to unearth every secret of her heart that she has kept from him.

I cried last night Lytton, whilst he [her lover Ralph Partridge] slept by my side sleeping happily. I cried to think of a savage cynical fate, which had made it impossible for my love ever to be used by you. You never knew, or never will know the very big and devastating love I had for you. How I adored every hair, every curl on your beard. How I devoured you whilst you read to me at night. How I loved the smell of your face in your sponge. Then the ivory skin on your hands, your voice, and your hat when I saw it coming along the top of the garden wall from my window....²

Carrington's heartbreaking confession floods the reader with emotion, but a letter is more than a beautiful shout. In conversation we might spill our secret feelings and ideas. However, putting them into written words forces us to process them more fully and truly. This act of thinking out what you want to say might at first seem to make people more careful, more hesitant to reveal their true feelings or experiences. Remarkably, much of the time it does not.

Another painter, Vincent Van Gogh, wrote hundreds of letters to his brother Theo. In these fascinating human documents the reader finds a balance of the mundane and the spiritual, of the wonders of the universe and the simplest human difficulties. But their primary appeal is their uncompromising honesty. In a letter from July 1880, after an unusual lapse of eight months, Vincent writes to Theo to try to regain an interrupted friendship: "To a certain degree you have become a stranger to me, and I have become

the same to you, more than you may think; perhaps it would be better for us not to continue in this way.”³ He lays out his faults and feelings, saying sincerely:

I am a man of passions, capable of and subject to doing more or less foolish things, which I happen to repent, more or less, afterward. Now and then I speak and act too hastily, when it would have been better to wait patiently. I think other people sometimes make the same mistakes. Well, this being the case, what's to be done? Must I consider myself a dangerous man, incapable of anything? I don't think so. But the problem is to try every means to put those selfsame passions to good use.⁴

His emotions are raw, on the surface. In being honest with his brother, he must be honest with himself, saying things like, “I have lost the confidence of many; it is true that my financial affairs are in a sad state; it is true that the future is only too gloomy; it is true that I might have done better; it is true that I've lost time in terms of earning my bread; it is true that even my studies are in a rather sad and hopeless condition, and that my needs are greater – infinitely greater – than my possessions.”⁵ The letter goes on for thousands of words, while Vincent empties out his emotions, his ideas, and his tortured relationship with the world and with God. He is explaining himself, at times justifying himself, and his honesty takes the form of a working-through, in the act of writing, of his most secret soul.

But he is not speaking in a void, or even to the blank pages of a journal. He is speaking to his brother, someone he trusts, someone who draws these truths from him. At the end of this July 1880 letter he tells Theo hopefully: “We are rather far apart, and perhaps we have different views on some things, but nevertheless there may come an hour, there may come a day, when we may be of service to one another.” If we had met Van Gogh on the street, would he have bared his soul to us in the way he does in his letters? Of course not. We would have met a strange hermit whose sullen anger or abrupt passions would have probably frightened

us. It is the focusing of Van Gogh's mind through the medium of a letter to one person that makes it real, makes it different than a diary entry, as well as giving it a clear tension, a nearly hopeless wish for just one person to understand him.

In this way, a great letter is both honest and attentive to the reader, just as all great literature is. The letters of Heloise d'Argenteuil and Peter Abelard tell the tragic story of a medieval French couple who fell in love in Paris, bore a child out of wedlock, and married in secret. They were then torn apart by treachery, and Abelard was castrated. After taking to the cloister as monk and nun, the estranged couple renewed their liaison in letters. But it is a very different relationship now: Heloise at first tries to renew the feelings of love between them, while Abelard claims that he never loved her but only lusted after her. Knowing her audience is wounded and taking refuge in his faith, Heloise tries to balance their passionate past and their ecclesiastical present.

At every stage of my life up to now, as God knows, I have feared to offend you rather than God, and tried to please you more than him. It was your command, not love of God, which made me take the veil. Look at the unhappy life I lead, pitiable beyond any other, if in this world I must endure so much in vain, with no hope of future regard. For a long time my pretence [sic] deceived you, as it did many, so that you mistook hypocrisy for piety; and therefore you commend yourself to our prayers and ask me for what I expect from you. I beg you, do not feel so sure of me that you cease to help me by your own prayers. Do not suppose me healthy and so withdraw the grace of your healing. Do not believe I want for nothing and delay helping me in my hour of need. Do not think me strong, lest I fall before you can sustain me.⁶

Heloise knows she cannot ask Abelard to love her romantically anymore, but she asks instead for another kind of care, in a way that he might respond favorably to. She knows her audience and their

complicated relationship, and she tries to manage that relationship through what could only be a tragic and bitter denouement.

We can see this attention to audience in the work of another great letter writer, poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Born in 1875, Rilke's first collection of poems came out when he was twenty-three, and he wrote some of the most beloved German verse of all time. But many argue that his transcendent letters are even more influential than his poetry. The most famous collection is *Letters to a Young Poet*, ten missives from Rilke to Franz Kappus, a young man torn between the artistic and military life. Kappus was only nine years younger than Rilke, and through the years 1903 to 1908 the two of them corresponded. Of course, Rilke is a great poet, and his letters have a poetic style that gives them density and weight. But it is his attention to his youthful audience that makes these letters so beloved.

The first letter is from Paris, dated February 17, 1903. It begins:

Your letter only reached me a few days ago. I want to thank you for its great and kind confidence. I can hardly do more. I cannot go into the nature of your verses; for all critical intention is too far from me. With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings. Things are not so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures.⁷

After this gentle preamble, in which Rilke takes the young poet's simple request to critique his poetry and transforms it into a philosophical statement on the limits of language and the nature of art, he tells him not what he wants to hear, but what he needs to. "Let me only tell you further that your verses have no individual style,

although they do show quiet and hidden beginnings of something personal.” He comments on the few poems that do show promise, and then writes:

You ask whether your verses are good. You ask me. You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts. Now (since you have allowed me to advise you) I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all – ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you meet this earnest question with a strong and simple “I must,” then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.⁸

Rilke has taken what the young poet wanted, a friendly critique, and delved to the very roots of that questioning desire. Does Kappus really need to be a writer? Is that his life work? If so, Rilke gives him more advice about how to go about becoming that writer, telling him to look to Nature, to write about everyday life, to “raise the submerged sensations of that ample past.” If he does this, then “If out of this turning inward, out of this absorption into your own world verses come, then it will not occur to you to ask anyone whether they are good verses.” If becoming a poet is not the destiny he finds at the bottom of his heart, then “this inward searching which I ask of you will not have been in vain. Your life will in any case find its own ways thence, and that they may be good, rich, and wide I wish you more than I can say.”⁹

Rilke has grabbed the opportunity to instruct his reader not only in poetry, but in the art of living itself. His series of letters to a young poet continues to instruct, to inspire, and to work through ideas, all focused to the young poet's needs and questions, and his words echo over a century later to any young person finding a way in the world.

In a letter to her sister Cassandra, novelist Jane Austen wrote, "I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth."¹⁰ Just as a conversation is more than delivering news, expressing your thoughts to a reader fully and completely, whether on paper or on an electronic screen, transcends the mere message in both its intention and effect. Therefore, even though the resulting letters are personal documents usually intended for one reader, they can be considered literature just as readily as an autobiography or personal essay. This literary form achieves its greatest heights through a tension between the needs of the audience and the honesty of the writer. And though our own correspondence may not reach the beauties of Rainer Maria Rilke's or Vincent Van Gogh's, it is a literary form worth pursuing in its directness and simplicity.

But that is not the only reason letters are worthwhile. In a letter from Sweden on August 12, 1904, Rilke gives the young poet a long detailed instruction of how to live a life close to art, speaking to Mr. Kappus's specific concerns in a way that makes them universal. Then he writes something that gives us key not just to Rilke's purpose, but to the purpose of all letters.

And if there is one thing more that I must say to you, it is this: Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet words that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness and remains far behind yours. Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find those words.¹¹

Rilke knows Kappus's troubles, because they are his own. And though he is in one sense writing to a separate, actual person, he

is also clearly writing to his younger self, to his own soul. All great letters work this way, are a conscious or unconscious consideration of our own lives through the lens of a specific reader.

When my friend Ryan Rasmussen moved to New Zealand, we both saw the chance to make writing letters a part of our relationship. We don't have to; after all we email, we send messages on Facebook, and we even use Skype videophone technology to see each other nine thousand miles away. But we also write letters, because we know that a letter is different, is a more developed species of communication, is *more*. A letter offers space to think and feel. In a letter Ryan can build up to and acknowledge things perhaps too uncomfortable for face-to-face conversation, and too important for a text message:

I am at a crossroads as a man. I am no longer care-free, if I ever was. I am happy but unfulfilled. I can no longer coast, holding myself back from fully engaging the world. The past two years have been the most blessed crisis one could hope for, terror and longing and beauty and regret. Maybe that's what passes for a life, for many. I only know, can only trust, that I must press forward, one step at a time, against whatever resistance the world and my own weakness throw at me.

He can write this to me because I offer an understanding and like-minded audience, and he offers the same to me. But what is created by our correspondence is more than just the opportunity to tell the truth. In my letters to Ryan I try to balance the mundane and spiritual, the wonders of the universe and the simplest human difficulties. I try to imbue each message with what little style I can muster. And most importantly I try to focus an honest accounting of experience and emotion through the lens of our friendship. Not because I think I am going to create great literature doing so, but because writing each letter forces me to examine my own feelings, to concentrate on others' needs, and to process ideas through the truest possible words. In short, writing a letter makes me a better person. After all, every letter I send to the farthest corner of the earth is also written to my self.

¹ Sullivan Ballou to Sarah Ballou, July 14, 1861, The Civil War Home Page (www.civil-war.net), accessed November 4, 2012.

² Dora Carrington to Lytton Strachey, May 14, 1921, *Love Letters* (London: Everyman's Library, 1996), 177-181.

³ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, July 1880, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2001), 199-200.

⁴ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, July 1880, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2001), 194.

⁵ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, July 1880, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2001), 199-200.

⁶ Heloise to Abelard, *From the Letters of Abelard and Heloise: Forbidden Fruit*, trans. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 88.

⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke to Franz Kappus, February 17, 1903, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. By M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1954), 17.

⁸ Ibid, 18-19.

⁹ Ibid, 20-21.

¹⁰ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, January 3, 1801, *The Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. by Lord Edward Braburn (Digireads, 2010), 86.

¹¹ Rainer Maria Rilke to Franz Kappus, August 12, 1904, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. By M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1954), 72.

The Commons: UB Faculty Essays

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1. The essay should be between 2000-5000 words, though exceptions can be made for slightly longer ones.
2. Essays should not have had prior appearance in print or in digital form. The author will retain the copyright for future publication.
3. Essays should engage a general readership. They should be influenced by scholarly training and experiences related to our disciplines, but not be scholarly writing. For example, an essay on "Henry Miller and Jean Francois Lyotard: The Aesthetics of 'The Inhuman' in *Tropic of Cancer*" would be inappropriate both because it is too narrow a topic, and because it would be too technical for a general audience. However, this is also not a blog entry. Instead, locate it somewhere between a personal essay and a semi-formal essay on a general topic of interest.
4. The citation method will be end notes (a style sheet is available), although it is certainly possible to write an essay without notes at all or with a list of sources for further reading.
5. Faculty should also provide a biographical paragraph and a photo.
6. A proposal or query letter is encouraged, with or without a draft of the essay. Certainly, if there is a completed essay you think is appropriate, send it to the editorial board. But before starting an essay, we encourage you to consult the board in the planning stages.
7. Send all materials to thecommons@bridgeport.edu.



Is letter-writing dead? Has the internet killed it? In “Yours Truly,” Eric D. Lehman finds that while the style may be changing, the form of correspondence known as a letter is alive and well. Just as a conversation is more than delivering news, expressing your thoughts to a reader fully and completely, whether on paper or on an electronic screen, transcends the mere message in both its intention and effect. And even though the resulting letters are personal documents usually intended for one reader, they can be considered literature just as readily as an autobiography or personal essay.

Eric D. Lehman teaches creative writing and the literature of travel and adventure at the University of Bridgeport. He is the author of eight books, including *Afoot in Connecticut: Journeys in Natural History* and *Becoming Tom Thumb: Charles Stratton, P.T. Barnum, and the Dawn of American Celebrity*. He is the editor of the school literary magazine, *Groundswell*, and in his spare time he pursues Henry Miller scholarship, writing academic essays for *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal*. He also enjoys writing letters.

